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World Water Week: It's Not Just About Water

Available in: [中文](#), [العربية](#), [Français](#), [Español](#)**Aug. 24, 2012**

Often neglected, the world's sanitation crisis needs urgent attention across multiple sectors to meet the basic needs of 2.5 billion people without access. Creating demand for sanitation and behavior change will be critical.

While food and water top the list of essentials for health and human development, around 1 billion people still go hungry, and nearly 1 billion still lacked access to an improved water source.

The opportunity to explore the relationship between these two essentials is drawing thousands of academics and practitioners from the food and water sectors to Stockholm for World Water Week, August 26-31. This year, the annual conference will focus on "Water and Food Security." It's an important topic. Access to food and safe, clean water is critical to every aspect of human life —agriculture, education, energy, health, and many others. However, there is another urgent issue that gets less attention but is equally critical: sanitation.

Sanitation—a fundamental means for preventing disease and elevating quality of life—has long been considered neglected in the sector. Since 2002, when sanitation was added to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), sanitation activities and practitioners have increased global awareness of the role sanitation plays in improving human health and well-being.

"The issue of sanitation is about health and economic loss, but it's also an issue of equity and human rights," said Lead Sanitation Specialist Eddy Perez of the [Water and Sanitation Program](#) (WSP) of the World Bank. "It's the poorest people who do not have basic access, which contributes to keeping them poor."

An estimated 1.7 million people die each year because of unsafe water, lack of sanitation, and unhygienic practices; about 90 percent of those deaths are children under age five. Improvements to sanitation and access to clean drinking water could reduce diarrheal disease by nearly 90 percent. The [economic toll of poor sanitation](#) is equally staggering, as high as 7 percent of GDP in some countries. And while sanitation has received more attention in recent years, there is still more learning needed on the most effective approaches and at-scale service delivery models.

Old problem, new solutions

The solutions can't happen in silos or with business-as-usual models. New approaches are being tested, and they show tremendous promise. The current World Bank sanitation portfolio is about US\$1.7 billion, with approximately 7.4 million people expected to benefit in more than 30 countries.

WSP is working with governments on [national-scale rural sanitation programs](#) targeted at increasing access to and use of sanitation facilities. The Scaling up Rural Sanitation Project is credited with contributing to around 9 million people gaining access in India, Indonesia, and Tanzania.



More emphasis has been placed on the idea that ownership begins when people invest time, effort, and resources into building a latrine. The importance of changing behaviors and the factors that influence behaviors, such as pride, convenience, well-being, and status, is now recognized. Increasingly, a combination of approaches that ultimately lead to changing behaviors and increasing demand and supply are understood as critical for success.

In the past five years, the [Scaling Up Rural Sanitation Project](#) has focused on learning what works to scale up access to

A hardware store in Peru sells sanitation supplies.
Photos: Water & Sanitation Program.

Rethinking irrigation to scale up access to
sanitation.

Among the [lessons](#):

- Efforts to improve sanitation should target community-wide behavior change, stimulate demand for sanitation products and services, and increase supply to ensure that new demands are met.
- Scaling innovative programmatic approaches requires an effective and sustainable service delivery model in which national, state, and local governments; communities; the local private sector; and development partners all participate.
- Changing social norms around open defecation and latrine use through sanitation and hygiene promotion is important for long-term sustainability of behaviors.

Across sectors

With water and sanitation at the nexus of so many areas, the water and sanitation crises have implications for the entire development community. We encourage you to follow us on Twitter [@wspworldbank](#) to join the discussion in Stockholm at World Water Week. Share your ideas, ask the hard questions, tell us how your work is affected by the crises, and work with us towards the solutions.

RELATED RESOURCES

- [What Does It Take to Scale Up Rural Sanitation? \(PDF\)](#)
- [Blog: Rethinking Irrigation to Fight Hunger](#)
- [Blog: Welcome to Water Week](#)
- [Sanitation Marketing Toolkit](#)
- [Water & Sanitation Program](#)
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